



Striving to Belong: Everyday Enactments of Belonging among Older Adults in Greenland

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the particularities of belonging in old age for older adults living in Uummannaq in Northern Greenland. Through analysis of in-depth interviews and conversations, we investigate older adults' relations to others and to places, and how belonging is a matter of moral and existential character. We use *acts of belonging* as an analytical concept to understand the everyday acts that older adults perform as their relations to family members, friends, and the community change, and their access to different places is challenged by declining health. We show how they continue to belong to others through activities such as preparing seal skin and fishing, but also how belonging can be challenged as one grows older. By doing so, we aim to show how belonging is not given or certain. Instead, it can be understood as an expression of agency when facing challenges in old age, not only in relation to others but also in how one sees oneself as an older adult.

Utoqqaat, Avannaani Uummannami najugallit, akornanni attuumassuteqarneq (belonging) immikkut ittoq allaaserisami matumani misissorparput. Itisiliilluni apersuinerit aamma oqaloqatiginninnerit misissoqqissaarnerisigut utoqqaat allanut aamma sumiiffinnut attuumassuteqarnerat, aamma taakku attuumassuteqarnerat ileqqorissaarnermik aamma tunngavimmik aalajangiisuusumik pissuseqarnerisigut misissorparput. Utoqqaat ilaqtutanut, ikinngutinut aamma inuiaqatigiinnut atassuteqarnerisa allangoriartornerat ilutigalugu ulluinnarni iliuuserisartagaat paasinialugit misissueqqissaarnermi "Acts of belonging" (iliuutsit, attuumassuteqarnermik pilersitsiffiusut) atorparput, aamma peqqissutsip appariartornera ilutigalugu sumiiffinnut assigiinngitsunut attuumassuteqarfigisaminnut peqataasinnaanerat unammilligassaqaalersitsilluni. Sammisassaqtitsinerit, soorlu ammerineq aamma aalisarneq aqqutigalugit allanut qanoq attuumassuteqartuaannarnersut, aammali attuumassuteqarnerit utoqqalinerimi qanoq unammilligassaqarfiulersinnaasarnersut misissorparput. Taamaaliornikkut attuumassuteqarnerup qanoq naatsorsuutigineqareersinnaanngitsiginera imaluunniit qularnaatsuunnginnera takutikkusupparput. Taarsiullugu utoqqalinerimi unammilligassanik naammattuinerimi iliuuseqarmissamut kiffaanngissuseqarnermik takutitsinertut paasineqarsinnaavoq, allanut tunngatillugu kisiat pinnagu, aammali utoqqalinerimi imminut qanoq isigernmut tunngatillugu.

Keywords: *Greenland, Inuit, Arctic, Belonging, Uncertainty*



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Introduction

Karen lived on her own after her children moved out and her husband, whose name she never mentioned, passed away. At first glance, there was no evidence in her house of their marriage, except for a single photograph of Karen and her husband at a party, sitting turned away from each other, looking in different directions. The nature of their relationship was always up for negotiation: “He was a nice man, it was just a problem that he had too many women, too much alcohol. He would sometimes go to the bar and not come home for three days,” she said when she described the one time she left him. Their children had moved out, so she could no longer find a reason to stay, and without telling him she traveled to Denmark and stayed with their daughter, who lived there. She continued:

But after two days in Denmark, I felt homesick. It was raining and I was crying the entire time. Then he said, ‘Why don’t you come home?’ He didn’t want to get divorced. I went home, but he kept seeing other women. But I had the house, and he was also very nice. He took care of all the brats my sisters had. I can be thankful to him that they all did so well. And he was handsome.

Often, she would say something negative about him, but then, follow it up with something positive as if he was somewhere in the room, listening to what she was saying.

And maybe, in some ways, he still was.

It’s Karen’s and other older adults’ experiences of belonging in old age that is central to the analysis and insights that we present in this article. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative research in Greenland, we have come to understand sense of belonging as something that changes and must be renegotiated in old age, and as a practice of existential and moral importance. Recent gerontological

research in Greenland describes how conditions of old age change the nature of older adults' relations to others, as well as challenges living in one's own home(town) and the ability to access certain places – matters that are important when it comes to questions of belonging. Thus, while belonging is rarely a stable or certain condition throughout life, the conditions of old age can further destabilize how people consider themselves to belong, particularly as social relations and access to places change. This evokes questions such as: How do I belong to society if I am no longer working? Who am I when my children have moved away? Who do I belong to now my husband has passed? Who am I when I have moved away from the place I belong to? Where do I go if my physical abilities no longer allow me to travel to the places where I used to go and catch the food that I'm used to eating and sharing?

Drawing on anthropologist Janne Flora's research in Greenland, we approach belonging as a process of constant negotiation. We focus on the everyday acts older adults perform in order to belong. We describe these as *acts of belonging*. The concept allows us to unfold how older adults actively seek to belong to others, to places, to their community, and to the Greenlandic Welfare State in ways that are meaningful to them. By striving to continue belonging through these acts in old age, our interlocutors enact understandings and ambitions of aging inherent within broader societal conceptualizations of aging as a lifestage and process that can, and should, be "successful" and "healthy." These conceptualizations, and the hopes they entail for potential easing of future challenges to national logistics and economics, dominate aging policies in Greenland as they do in many other countries.

Further, we build on anthropologist Tine Gammeltoft's (2014, 2018) theoretical description of belonging as a sense of attachment to others produced by joint social practice that can be uncertain, fragile, and ambivalent. She highlights the existential and moral matters that are at stake in her interlocutors' efforts to be a part of a larger social community. By focusing on belonging as processual acts enacted in unstable social circumstances, we open up to a focus on how older people maintain and create possibilities for belonging as their lives change in old age. In doing so, we aim to create new empirical perspectives on experiences of old age in a Greenlandic context and contribute to analytical perspectives on belonging.

After introducing the analytical framework for this article, we move on to describing the ethnographic fieldwork and analytical process that has formed the basis for insights offered in this article. Then, we describe the role that acts of belonging play in the lives of three older adults in Uummannaq: Karen Zeeb, Lars Jensen, and Christian. We show how they continue to belong to others through activities such as preparing seal skin and fishing, but also how their belonging is challenged as they grow older and also includes exclusion. By doing so, we aim to show how belonging is not given or certain, but instead can be understood as an expression of agency, not only in relation to others, but also in how one sees oneself as an older adult, thus bringing up questions of moral and existential matters.

Acts of Belonging

In the following, we provide the analytical framework for the insights offered in this article. We focus on studies of belonging in anthropology as well as anthropological and gerontological research in the Arctic that are relevant to the concept of acts of belonging as we use it in our analysis.

In recent years, belonging has, from an analytical perspective, gained increased scholarly attention. As a theoretical term, it has been widely used within anthropology, political science, and geography as intersubjective, territorial, or political belonging. Belonging refers to people's sense or practices of attachment to other individuals, places, and to communities. Intersubjective belonging has consistently been addressed in kinship studies in anthropology. Like the concept of relatedness, intersubjective

belonging describes how humans connect to one another through different practices. It can be used as an analytical tool that places people in webs of intimate relations, but it also goes further than that by describing how individuals strive to be a part of something bigger. In an Arctic context, there are several studies that explore how relatedness among Inuit is practiced through everyday expressions of kinship terminology, affection, sharing, working together, and visiting, as well as adoption and name-giving. These studies show that kinship ties can be chosen, just like they can cease to exist if they are not recognized or acted upon. They are thereby never stable, but always up for negotiation. Furthermore, intersubjective belonging is closely related to questions of existential matters. While research has shown that there's a strong sense of personal autonomy in different Inuit societies, personhood and personal autonomy is rooted in social relations and communities. Cooperation, sharing, and solidarity are seen as important values in individuals. Flora (2019) describes that for her interlocutors in a small settlement in Greenland, personhood is made of a combination of different entities, such as name and soul, but also relations to people and place. Relatedness to others is embedded in the Greenlandic language; when you meet strangers, you don't ask "Who are you?," but "Who do you belong to?" or "Whose are you?" ("Kiuut/Kinaavit/Kinaatit?" depending on the region). Thus, to understand what makes up an individual, it's necessary to understand how a person is related to others. Unlike more conventional categories of identity, which have the tendency to fix people in specific roles (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, or nationality), intersubjective belonging makes it possible to capture the plural and often contradictory memberships that characterize human lives.

Territorial belonging attends to the ways people develop, practice, claim, and nurture attachment to places, but also how places can come to define people. In Greenland this is present in the use of the affixes *-mioq* (singular) and *-miut* (plural) (e.g., someone who belongs to Uummanaq, is a *Uummanarmioq*). This term not only indicates where someone lives, but also how someone lives, such as one's dialect, eating preferences, local landscapes, family relations, and local sociopolitical structures. This doesn't mean that people never leave a place or that everyone, who is from the same place, acts and thinks the same way. It's also not set in stone where people consider themselves as being from, and a person can belong to more than one place at once. Belonging is, according to Flora, enacted through expressions of longing: "for company or for specific people, for particular places in the landscape or on the land (*nuna*), for foods, for times past, and for potential futures." As this description of belonging tells us, the distinction between attachment to a place and to a social group is often blurred. People are attached to places, often through the memories, experiences, and connections they have with people in that place, or because they are attached to social groups in certain places.

Belonging can also be a political issue. Political belonging has often been a central theme in studies of citizenship, nationalism, migration, and indigenous rights. Questions of citizenship and nationalism are important aspects of belonging, and often a matter of life and death, but are not only confined to formal matters. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2002) argues that political belonging is also a question of moral mutuality that attends to how the state recognizes its citizens, and how they in turn feel responsible towards society. Consequently, belonging is a concept where matters of identity, place, existence, and morality are all embedded and intertwined. It's also a concept that indicates a process or negotiation, rather than a stable state of being.

In this text, we focus on agency and practices related to belonging through the concept *acts of belonging*. Sociologist Ilgin Yörükoğlu (2020) uses the concept in her study of queer Muslim women of Turkish descent, who live in Berlin, to move attention from "where" they belong, whether it's a social or religious group, or specific nationalities, to "how" they belong to seemingly contradictory groups. We use the concept similarly to show how older adults strive to belong, through their actions, to people,

places, and their community and to live good old lives according to cultural and social norms. At the same time, a focus on the *acts* of belonging allows us to draw attention to the, sometimes subtle, work that goes on in everyday life, which might seem ordinary, but is important for the well-being of older adults. We do this by asking the following question: How do older adults in Greenland experience and create a sense of belonging in daily life?

Methodology

We answer this question through analysis of ethnographic fieldwork carried out by Schlütter in different areas of Greenland during 2017-2019, and through a continuous engagement from both authors with different communities in Greenland. Most of the fieldwork was carried out by Schlütter over a total of seven months in the Uummannaq district in North Greenland as part of her PhD project. The district shares its name with its largest town. With its fishing factories, health center, police station, large school, retirement home, and administrative center, the town of Uummannaq is the heart of the district. The town is vital for the flows of goods, and public and private services that keep the entire district alive. During Schlütter's time in the district, she lived in Uummannaq (population: 1,359), but also visited the three settlements in the district – Saattut (population: 240), Qaarsut (population: 188), and Niaqornat (population: 37) – meeting and speaking with older adults there. Around 9% of the district's population were 65 years of age or older in 2018.

By spending time at activities for older adults, at the retirement home, and working part-time at different public institutions in Uummannaq, Schlütter got to know about 30 adults between 54 and 85 years of age, who considered themselves to be "old." She spent varying amounts of time with these older adults, ranging from a few short talks to spending hours talking, sewing, cooking, playing cards, and other activities in their homes or at their retirement homes, going for walks in the mountains or fishing on the ice. Schlütter had close relationships with three older men and two older women.

Throughout the article, we engage specifically in the stories of three Uummannarmiut – Karen Zeeb, Lars Jensen, and Christian – three of the five older adults that Schlütter spent the most time with throughout her time in Uummannaq. She spent a couple of hours with them every week, doing everyday activities such as sewing and cooking with Karen, fishing and going for walks with Lars, and playing cards and reading with Christian. She also participated in celebrations on special occasions and other activities with them, for instance, the celebration for Greenland's National Day with Lars and his family, and Gymnastics for Older Adults with Karen. Their stories represent a variety of life situations in old age that unfold in the analysis. All three were bilingual (Greenlandic/Danish), and conversations between Schlütter and these three older adults were mostly in Danish.

A local interpreter was present to assist with translation between Greenlandic and Danish at most of the interviews with older adults. While everyone was offered the presence of the interpreter, some chose to be interviewed in Danish instead. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 2 hours but would mostly take about an hour. Depending on the person being interviewed and the dynamics between the people present, the interview would take different directions and follow themes and topics brought up by the older adults.

The analysis is also based on insights gained through a range of ethnographic fieldwork: interviews and surveys carried out at different locations in Greenland. Schlütter's PhD project is part of the larger research and development project, "Ageing in the Arctic" (AgeArc) where researchers from different disciplines carry out surveys, fieldwork, and interviews in all parts of Greenland. The quantitative and qualitative insights and results from AgeArc have guided the analytical focus of the present article.

Returning to Uummannaq several times from 2018-2019 and staying in contact with older adults through phone calls, letter writing, and social media has been an intentional methodological choice for Schlütter. Between each visit to Uummannaq, Schlütter identified and explored different potential themes in the ethnographic material with supervisors and colleagues at Aarhus University, University of Copenhagen, and Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland. Upon each return to Greenland and in letters, phone calls, and online messaging, Schlütter discussed potential themes with older adults in Uummannaq to make the research process more collaborative and transparent. The continuous dialogue between Schlütter, other researchers, and older adults living in Greenland evoked reflections about her position as a Danish researcher in a Greenlandic context and how this influenced the research process, highlighting the partial and situated nature of knowledge production and representation. The continuous dialogue between project participants and Schlütter has been done with the intention of ensuring that the research agenda aligned with the needs, wants, interests, and possibilities of the older adults in question, thus challenging existing “hit-and-run” patterns of Arctic research.

The analysis in this article was developed through a continuous collaborative process between Schlütter and Jensen. The analysis focused on ethnographic descriptions based on Schlütter’s fieldwork and the continued exchange between Schlütter and Jensen about this fieldwork. There has been an ongoing dialogue about potential themes and analytical concepts informed by Schlütter’s and Jensen’s experiences and encounters through fieldwork and research in Greenland as well as theoretical knowledge and discussions.

After being told about the theme and analysis of the article, Karen and Lars allowed us to use their real names. Both expressed that they wanted their stories to be told and, in order not to make them invisible by blurring their identities, we chose to use their real names. As it was not possible to share the analysis with Christian, we use a pseudonym for him. All three signed an informed consent document allowing us to share their stories, as requested by the Scientific Ethics Committee of Health Research in Greenland.

By emphasizing the particularities of Karen, Lars, and Christian’s experiences, we will highlight the complexities and nuances of acts of belonging in old age, as we have come to understand them. For Karen, who was introduced at the beginning of the article, the work of a hunter’s wife enabled her to feel a sense of belonging to others, to the land, and to the community. In the following, we take a closer look at her story to show how acts of belonging had moral value in Karen’s striving for a good life in old age.

A Hunter’s Widow

Anthropologist Pete Collings (2001) argues that Canadian Inuit women are less impacted in their daily lives by physical decline than the men of their communities are. However, some women’s occupations as hunter’s wives are deeply intertwined with their husband’s hunting activities and vice versa: it’s an interdependent cooperation between the two. Thus, if the husband is unable to hunt and fish due to physical decline, there would presumably be less work for his wife, and without a wife to receive and prepare the catch, the hunter would be challenged in his activities. Status and social relations can come to influence how “successfully” someone ages, as access to *Kalaalimernit* (Greenlandic food) is important to older adults. If the husband and his wife were a great hunting couple, the wife might continue some activities as a hunter’s wife even if her husband becomes unable to hunt, because younger family and community members share their catch with them. This was the case for Karen even after her husband’s passing. As her husband died more than two decades before Schlütter’s arrival in Uummannaq, Karen

was no longer actually a hunter's wife, but as a hunter's widow, she fulfilled an important role in maintaining traditional activities and knowledge. To her, these activities were a way to practice belonging to her husband, her family, the land, and the community.

Until Karen married her husband, she was a "city girl," she said, referring to her upbringing in Uummanaq as opposed to the settlement her husband was from. She described her younger self as beautiful, but without the skills required to be a hunter's wife. Through their marriage, she became a hunter's wife and learned the skills needed. Even after her husband's passing, her role as a hunter's wife was present in the way Karen had arranged the home, where she had lived with her husband and raised their children. The house was surrounded by a big porch, where seal skin hung in frames to dry. The entrance had space for the many jackets, coats, and overalls you need when you live in the Arctic as well as a freezer for storing fish, seals, reindeer, and other game that her grandsons and nephews had caught for her. In the adjacent utility room, big white buckets covered the floor. Karen used these to soak the fat off seal skin in salt water. Some skins would lie in water for weeks on end to make it easier to scrape off the hair and use it for *arnatuut*, the white boots used for some of the Greenlandic national dresses. The preparation of seal skin left a distinct smell in Karen's home. "The smell of money, but I like it," she would say, jokingly, though there was some truth to it. She, like others, earned a little extra money in addition to their pension. Other adults repaired or made national costumes, sold dried cod, had a small cleaning job, did some accounting, or volunteered in local organizations. Most older adults, including Karen, explained that they did these jobs to avoid becoming a burden to their community. These activities were not only productive economically but also had social and cultural value. In the following, we show how Karen found value in performing tasks that kept her connected to her family members and to the land.



Figure 1: Karen preparing seal skin in her utility room. Photo: Mette Mørup Schlütter

Karen performed and enabled activities that are threatened by the migration of women from smaller communities to bigger towns, cities, and to Denmark in their pursuit of education and professional employment – migration that challenges traditional modes of life in Greenland. She prepared sealskin, sewed clothes and bags from it, and cut and cooked the meat and organs. Many of her nephews, whom she and her husband had taken care of when her sisters were away for work, and her grandsons came to her with the seals they caught. The process of preparing the different parts of the seals kept her busy for months at the time. She would lay out newspapers on the kitchen floor and use her *ulu* (a woman's knife) to cut off the seal's flippers and then cut it open from the bottom up. With steady hands, she would separate the skin from the body by sliding her *ulu* into the blubber. Blood would stain the newspaper, as she pulled the skin away and put it in one of her big white buckets to quickly cleanse it. Then she carefully cut out the organs, holding one end of the intestines in her hand, pulling them out, and folding them over again and again until coiled up. With blood-stained hands, she would cut the meat, and finally divide organs and meat into plastic bags, knowing exactly what to do with the different parts: some were good for grilling, others for boiling in soup or fermentation. When meat and organs were put away, she would continue the preparation of the skin by cutting the remaining blubber off and tying the skin onto one of the many frames. There it would hang to dry until she took it down. She would then crumble, chew, and stomp on it, until it was soft enough to work with. Karen would sell some skins right off the frame. At other times she would sew bags and clothes from it and sell them. The meat and organs she would either keep for herself or give back to the nephews, who had caught the seal. Her nephews either were unmarried or had wives who did not have the time or skills to prepare seal. Instead, Karen fulfilled the role of a hunter's wife for her nephews. When bad weather was coming, Karen would feel a special kind of pain around her head as a warning. If she knew that some of the men in her family were out fishing or hunting, she would check her phone for news of their return to Uummannaq, similar to how women in other parts of the country look towards the horizon searching for signs of their husband's return from hunting trips.

The work she performed not only kept her connected with family members, but she also stayed connected to the land as *Kalaalimernit* became available to her. That belonging to people and belonging to place are intertwined becomes especially evident in the importance of, and access to, *Kalaalimernit*: the way it's gathered or caught, prepared, and eaten is an important part of belonging to others and to the land. For instance, cod tastes different depending on where in the fiord area it has been caught, and those living in the retirement home away from their settlement would often express that they missed eating the fish from their home fiord. Longing for specific foods becomes a way to express belonging to a specific place. *Kalaalimernit* is made available through access to, and knowledge of, different places and it connects people through hunting activities and sharing practices. Karen would sometimes talk about where the different seals, whose skin now hung on frames on her porch, were from, or she would talk about going with her nephews on a trip to certain places to catch capelin. For older adults, who can no longer hunt due to physical decline, social relations and status in the community can become determinant for their access to *Kalaalimernit*, as they depend on others to share their catch with them or help them access certain places. This means that those who have weaker social networks or positions within the different communities not only experience isolation in their social lives but are also unable to show and practice belonging to certain places. For Karen, her husband's ability as a hunter was dependent on her abilities as a hunter's wife, and this relationship left traces even after his death, which made it possible for her to practice acts of belonging in the present.

Searching for Ways Not to Be a Burden

For Lars, traditional activities held moral values of importance to him. Anthropologist Claudio Aporta (2009) argues that some aspects of Inuit identity and culture can be understood in terms of moving;

moving is considered a way of living and being on the land¹ a form of belonging. He describes how trails in Arctic Canada connect different people, hunting grounds, settlements, and towns. The trails are not just travel routes, but significant in themselves, as they are places to meet others and exchange knowledge about weather, travel conditions and news, and perhaps exchange gas and cigarettes. The trails that people travel along are not permanent. While there are seasons during which busy trails are carved into the snow, they can quickly disappear in heavy snowfalls, or melt away on warm days. Before the introduction of maps and navigation systems such as GPS, trailbreakers would have to recreate the trail from memory and oral knowledge passed down through generations. This practice signifies an attachment to different communities, where knowledge is kept alive and shared, but also to generations of the past and to the land. Collings has described the ability to continue going on the land as important for older Inuit men in Arctic Canada, who defined “successful aging” as the ability to continue fishing and hunting despite physical decline in old age. Research among older adults in Greenland has also shown that staying active and being able to spend time in nature is important to older adults. However, access to the land is increasingly challenged in old age as the body declines, making older adults dependent on help from others. Like older Inuit men in Northern Canada, it was important for Lars to stay active despite physical decline in old age. In the following, we look at the role that activities of going on the land played in his striving for a good life.

Lars lived with his partner and grandchildren in Uummannaq. “You know,” Lars said, orange fish line in hand, “back in the day, old people used to go out on the ice to die, when they became a burden.” He was standing on the ice, fishing, with every intention of returning to Uummannaq later in the day with buckets full of cod. Lars would hang the cod to dry on his porch and later sell them or give them away. “Why do you think they did that?” Schlütter asked to which Lars answered: “No one wants to be a burden.” Being dependent on others was something many older adults expressed worry about, as they talked about not wanting to be a burden to other family members or the community.



Figure 2: Lars at his fishing spot looking towards Uummannaq. Photo: Mette Mørup Schlütter

Every year, in late winter/early spring, when the sea ice began to harden, Lars was among the first to make it out on the ice. Almost every morning, anyone whose house had views towards Salliaruseq (The Big Island) could watch as he and his dog made it out onto the ice walking towards his usual fishing spot. Sometimes, other Uummannarmiut, who didn't fish or hunt for a living but enjoyed fishing every now and then, would join him, because he was proof that it was a good spot to fish, and because he always stood within walking distance from the town. Not even the never-ending carousel of temporary foreigners seemed to tire him. Most other hunters and fishermen would take their dog sledge or snowmobile and disappear over the horizon, traveling long distances, but Lars couldn't afford this nor would his health allow him to travel that way. Instead, he had just a single dog that took him on a small sledge to his fishing spot in the morning and carried him and his buckets of fish back by the end of the day.

Collings describes how Inuit in Northern Canada believe that living a good and active life makes aging successfully more likely. Lars experienced physical decline in old age and often described that he had not lived an easy life. He was no longer able to fish or work like he used to. Like many other older adults, he felt how the accumulation of different events in life had changed his overall health. In an accident at work, he had damaged his eyes, causing him to retire early from the workforce. Because of issues with his treatment, he lost a lot of money, and he explained that hopelessness caused him to begin drinking quite heavily for a couple of years. When his daughter moved to the city to work, and his two grandchildren moved in with him, he turned his life around to be a good grandfather. In spring, after dropping the children off at the school, he would go on to the ice to fish every day to earn money to pay off debt and give his grandchildren the possibility of better lives. It was the role he wanted to have in his grandchildren's lives that motivated him. The ice was his solution to support his close relations – and fulfill a role in his family and in the community of Uummannaq. However, Lars' acts of belonging were dependent on the presence of sea ice. It always seemed difficult to say exactly when the sea ice would form and how long it would last.

In late spring/early summer, Lars was one of the last men standing on the ice as it became thinner, and he increasingly expressed worry about the upcoming summer and fall. He did not have the financial means to buy a boat to fish from and his eyesight was too poor for him to sail. The disappearance of the sea ice isolated him on Uummannaq Island as well as from the activities that kept him busy. "Maybe I could get my old job back," he sometimes pondered. When Schlütter flew out of Uummannaq in late spring/early summer after a longer period of fieldwork, Lars was not to be seen at his usual fishing spot. The ice had become unsafe, and the many tracks that connected Uummannaq to other settlements slowly disappeared as the sea ice turned into open waters. Lars later recounted summer and fall as difficult times when he sunk into darkness. Without the possibility of fishing during these seasons, it was hard to fill time with meaningful activities. He missed the feeling of fresh spring days and crispy snow, and the rhythmic sound of orange string being pulled against the edges of the hole in the ice. But more than that, he missed being surrounded by people, who would come to buy dried cod from him, discuss weather- and fishing conditions or stand with him on the ice, fishing, mostly in silence. Thus, not only did fishing during the seasons with sea ice give him more economic leeway, but it was also a way to sustain or create new social relations with the community of Uummannaq. He managed to create a place on the ice where Uummannarmiut and foreigners could go and connect with the land, each other, and traditional values through fishing.

Due to physical decline and limited financial means, Lars was unable to travel far nor along the same trails as most of the fishermen and hunters in the Ummannaq district. He still went on the ice to fish, however, in a way that his health allowed; instead of disappearing into the horizon, travelling inland, and along sometimes invisible paths, Lars fished in plain sight and close to home. This made it possible for him to achieve belonging similar to that achieved by Canadian Inuit traveling on the land (Aporta 2009). It was his visibility and proximity to others that enabled his belonging, as it made it possible for people to come to him. To Lars, the sea ice was a way to belong to the community rather than leave it: to belong rather than be a burden.

Holding on to Stamps

The examples of Karen and Lars show how performing acts of belonging that were considered valuable in the community enabled them to contribute to and participate in their local community. Christian, who was one of the youngest residents living in the retirement home, was challenged in performing acts of belonging. In the following, we share his story to make visible how acts of belonging can be challenged in old age as the body declines.



Figure 3: The table in Christian's room in the retirement home. Photo: Mette Mørup Schlütter

Christian spent most of his days looking out the window of his room on the bottom floor of the retirement home. From there, he could watch as people crossed the town's square to go to the grocery store or the municipality office. In front of him on the table was an old TV; there was a hospital bed and a collection of books in the room, and a few pictures on the wall, but other than that the room felt empty. Christian had worked at the mine and kept postage stamps from the letters he had sent to his daughters when he was away. The stamps had no monetary value as they were used and common, but he held

onto them anyway. Later Christian worked at the fishing factory where he performed other kinds of manual labor. In most of his jobs, he had been a valued employee, as he was good at writing and speaking both Danish and Greenlandic and functioned as both a cultural and linguistic interpreter between Greenlanders and Danes. He retired early and moved into the retirement home. The many years of manual labor had left his body in constant cycles of pain. His family would visit every now and then, but they were not a part of his daily life. He would play cards with the other residents, but it seemed like an activity that was mostly used to pass time. He knew countless stories about polar explorers and enjoyed telling them when someone asked him to, but few did. While he used to fish, hunt and collect eggs and edible flowers in his spare time, he no longer had the physical ability to perform these activities, limiting his access to Kalaalimernit. Just by walking down the hallway and taking the elevator to the first floor for lunch, he would lose his breath. When he sat still for too long, his body began to ache. He spent most days watching TV or reading until his body began to hurt. Then he would walk down the hallway and stand outside to smoke a cigarette while looking at people running errands in the town square.

The majority of Christian's daily interactions were with professional caretakers, or with other residents at the retirement home. He considered his relationship with the caretakers one-sided as he depended solely on them and found it somewhat hurtful to see himself mirrored in the other residents. Both things seemed to reduce him to being old and dependent. Unlike Karen and Lars, he was often unable to perform acts of belonging that were valuable in and to the community. The different roles and activities that had tied him to people and society earlier in life were no longer valued in the community on which he had come to depend.

Christian's ability to perform acts of belonging was especially challenged by his declining body and his retirement from the workforce. Some of the other bilingual older adults in town had part-time jobs facilitating communication between locals and foreigners. This made them able to perform acts of belonging, as they possessed valuable resources for the community, such as working as interpreters between foreign health care professionals and patients in the health clinic. When Schlütter asked Christian to translate between herself and the caretakers or other residents, he would light up, perhaps because it somehow set him apart from the role of being old and dependent.

Christian's, and in some ways also Lars' and Karen's, story shows how belonging can become increasingly uncertain in old age. For Lars, his ability to perform acts of belonging depended on the ice and his sense of belonging was challenged when this space was not available to him during summer and fall. Then he came to see himself as a burden to the community rather than a part of it. For Karen, her husband's passing caused her to renegotiate her role as a hunter's wife to become a hunter's widow and search for ways to continue to belong to her husband, family and community. For Christian, it had become increasingly difficult to perform acts of belonging through which he was able to create value for himself and others as his body declined and he often found himself in pain. It made him unable to work or join activities on the land and made it difficult for him to visit family; he was dependent on them to come to him. Sometimes, they would come by, but never for long. Statistics from the Greenlandic National Health Survey from 2018 show that Christian was not alone in experiencing difficulties with remaining connected to people and community. The survey shows that older adults who were mentally vulnerable or had physical limitations in their everyday lives were also most lonely.

As we have come to understand it, Christian came to see himself as someone who stood outside of the community. Perhaps holding on to the stamps from the letters he sent to his daughters was one last try to hold on to a time and a space, and to a family and a workplace, to which he belonged. Drawing on

Flora's description of longing as an expression of belonging, we consider Christian's holding on to the stamps as an act of belonging, adding a temporal aspect to belonging that draws traces of the past into the present.

Belonging to the Past and to the Future

Like Christian, Karen too shared a presence with people who were no longer there in the way they used to be. Not only did her role as a hunter's widow enable her to perform acts of belonging in the present in relation to her nephews and community, but it also enabled her to practice a sense of belonging that connected her to her late husband. As already described, she would often say something negative about him, then burst out laughing as if it had been a joke or follow up with a positive comment about him or their relationship, as if he was somewhere in the room, listening. Some of the coat hooks hung empty out of her reach, and the room upstairs was a closed-off space to visitors. She used to sleep there with him in a big double bed, but after his death, she had rearranged her living room with a single bed: "We had a big double bed, my husband and me. But I search for him," she said, indicating how she would wake up at night after his death and search for him in the bed.

Karen never stated any certainty about what she believed happened after someone dies. She said that she was "Christian, baptized and confirmed, wedded into that horrible marriage," and then laughed. Later, she told the story of her son who had died in an accident when he was little and returned when his name soul (*ateq*) had been passed on to a newborn. Flora (2019) argues that death in Greenland is not a permanent absence, as people return through traditions of name-giving. Karen also talked about how her brothers and uncle had died in an accident at sea and that they were now part of nature. She sometimes spoke about their death through a story about three narwhals or a drawing of three blue pine trees. Karen didn't express certainty about how the deceased people in her life were present. Instead, their presence was similar to how anthropologist Lisa Stevenson (2014) describes the presence of a dead relative of a young Inuk she met during fieldwork in Nunavut. One night, he talked about a raven, whom his sister believed to be their deceased uncle, now visiting them. When asked by Stevenson if he believed that the raven really was his uncle, he responded, "I don't know ... It's still there" (Stevenson 2014, 2). It was the same kind of "thereness" that Karen shared with the deceased people in her life, and it was a thereness that enabled a kind of belonging that tied the past to the present. This was especially evident in how she expressed belonging to her husband: a constant negotiation about his presence, the nature of their relationship, and her role as his wife, which never seemed to reach any kind of closure. They enabled each other's belonging: he, through his role as a hunter in their marriage, which was mutually dependent on her abilities as a hunter's wife. These abilities outlived his death and made it possible for Karen to perform acts of belonging with her nephews through her role as a hunter's widow. But also, the presence of the past was accompanied by an unsettledness in the arrangement of her home, and in the way she talked about him, which kept him present. Perhaps the absence of closure also meant that they still belonged to each other.

At the same time as her home indicated belonging to her husband, it also had a sense of loneliness about it. There were no couches or dining tables; she slept in the living room, and the kitchen was often a mess. She said that many people didn't like to come over because of the smell of preparing seals. It wasn't a home where she could invite her family over for dinner or host a *kaffemik*.² She said that it was fine: she wanted to live her life and arrange her house the way she liked it now that she was old and everyone had moved out. She was still healthy enough to visit her friends and her family whenever she wanted to and had so many friends that she didn't have time to go to all their funerals. But she also said

that perhaps when she got so old that she could no longer walk, she would get a new husband, who could push her down the aisle of the retirement home.

The Uncertainty of Belonging

In the analysis, we have explored acts of belonging for three older Uummannarmiut, Lars, Karen, and Christian. A sense of belonging was created as a result of Karen and Lars' ability to practice attachment to others, to the land, and to their communities through acts of belonging. Karen performed the role of a hunter's widow for the men in her family. The activities related to this not only generated economic value in the family and the community, but it also created moral value as it kept alive traditional knowledge of seal preparation, the land and hunting possibilities. The interdependence of the roles that Karen and her nephews held towards each other made it possible for them to carry out acts that express belonging to each other, to the community, to the land, but also to the past and the future: Karen could still belong to her husband, but her activities as a hunter's widow also kept alive valuable traditions and potential futures for her nephews and the community. While Karen was dependent on her nephews, she was more than that in her relation to them: they also depended on her for the preparation of food and seal skin, which we suggest kept her from seeing herself reduced to an old and dependent person. This was important for her well-being in old age. Similarly, Lars made fishing available to others, an activity that to him held moral value as it kept him from understanding himself as a burden to the community. Following Hage's description of political belonging as moral mutuality, it's possible to understand Lars' and Karen's acts of belonging as ways to live up to a responsibility they felt towards the community. In this way, there are also moral values embedded in acts of belonging that are existential in nature: They keep older adults from feeling devalued by being a burden to others.

Acts of belonging thus were considered a means to avoid becoming a burden, something that not only Karen, Lars, and Christian, but many older adults were concerned with. In an article about loneliness and social isolation among older adults in Danish anthropologist Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen (2019) argues that because the welfare state in Denmark provides care for older adults, very few are concerned about being a burden to their families as they grow older and their health declines. Instead, ideals about the "good old age" in Denmark are concerned with staying both physically and socially active and healthy. These ideals are shaped by beliefs that social isolation and loneliness lead to poor health in old age. In Greenland there are similar political and social concerns regarding the health of the increasingly aging population. Gerontological research has shown, that vast distances, harsh environmental conditions, and expensive means of transportation, such as sailing or flying, limit older adults' social interactions with family members who live far away. While the majority of older adults live in the same town or settlement as their children and grandchildren, it is not uncommon to live far away from your closest family members for short or long periods of time, especially if you come from a settlement or smaller town. Most parents in settlements send their children off to school in the bigger towns in Greenland or in Denmark around the age of 14-15 years, and from then, if the child wants to pursue further educational opportunities, they don't return until they have graduated – and many never return for more than short stays. Thus, living away from close family members is an experience many Greenlanders have, no matter their age, and as such, it's not in itself an experience that relates to old age.

However, older adults who live far away from family members may experience increasing dependence on others to maintain daily tasks, such as house chores, grocery shopping, and personal care. As their children have moved away, they come to depend on neighbors, friends, or professional care rather than family members in their everyday lives. Based on studies of old age in Tibetan exile, anthropologist Harmandeep Gill (2020) argues that problems can arise between older adults and professional

caretakers, because the older adult can come to see themselves reduced to an old and dependent person with declining health in the relation. A similar negative attitude towards the declining body and dependence in old age can be seen in gerontological models of “successful aging,” that frame the disease-free, independent, active old age as the ideal, something that’s unrealistic for most people . Models of successful aging dominate Greenlandic aging policies and initiatives that seek not only to improve the well-being of older adults in Greenland, but also to reduce expenses for the state and municipalities . As we have seen in the analysis, this dilemma is echoed in the everyday lives of older adults in Greenland. Older adults often express difficulty in depending on others – that it’s important to stay physically active and healthy and continue to live independently. Many describe that they don’t want to burden others and find it difficult to ask for help. Only 32% of adults above the age of 75, who live in their own homes, receive professional home care from the municipality . Decline in physical abilities often becomes a reality as the body ages, and due to a lack of local care opportunities and retirement homes in settlements, some older adults have to move to bigger towns and cities, causing their dislocation from the places and the people they have belonged to so far .

For the older adults Schlütter met in Uummannaq, their friends and families, as well as local health staff and municipality workers, the category of being old – “*utoqqaaq*” in Greenlandic and “*ældre*” or “*gammel*” in Danish – was not a question of being inactive and unproductive as argued by Collings is the case of Canadian Inuit, where one becomes old when they display “the characteristics of being old: withdrawing from community life, ‘slowing down,’ and ‘feeling lazy’” (Collings 2002, 121). Karen would say that she had taken care of others her whole life, and now that she was old, she wanted only to care for herself and do things that she found fun. This could be seen as a withdrawal from the community, but as we see in the description of her life, she found it very important to continue contributing to the community despite being old, and she was very productive and active. The acts of belonging were not done just for the sake of staying healthy but were important to stay active in culturally meaningful ways that made her feel like she belonged. In other words, old was not necessarily a steady category, but negotiable and fluid; it was used about and by people in different generations. Someone could be old in relation to their younger children, but not as old as someone living in a retirement home. The physical, social, and cultural ability to perform acts of belonging was not a question of whether one was old or not, but instead a question of the ability to strive for a good old age. For Christian, who often found himself in pain, performing acts of belonging was a challenge. His declining body made him invisible and unable to perform tasks that he considered valuable to the community.

As we see in the analysis, what comes to be at stake in social relations in old age is not only the relationships themselves, but also how changing relations to people and society shape older adults’ anxious self-perception of becoming a burden to others and to the community. Karen and Lars talked about their everyday acts of belonging as ways to belong to the community rather than being a burden to it, and Christian held on to memories of when he was a part of something. In old age, issues of who you are and how to belong are up for negotiation. For some, the changing relations are troublesome and may lead to perceived social exclusion and loneliness, such as in the case of Christian and Lars when they were unable to perform acts of belonging. Not being able to perform acts of belonging was something that Karen feared about the future, as she talked about having to remarry if she could no longer walk. If this were to happen, the current acts of belonging she performed would no longer be possible, but a new husband would be able to push her around the hallways of the retirement home in a wheelchair, so she could make friends and have fun.

In the context of Vietnamese women's reproductive decision-making, Gammeltoft (2014) shows how belonging's contingency becomes evident in moments of crisis: "when routines are suspended, social orientations are shattered and given forms of life are questioned, social membership and loyalties are brought into question too" (Gammeltoft 2014, 232). As we have shown through the stories of Karen, Lars and Christian, old age too can represent a crisis that offers insights into what it means to belong. However, rather than a moment of crisis, old age can be described as a prolonged period of crisis: characterized by uncertainty of belonging, where stability is not necessarily possible or expected. There might be moments of stability, but new losses await on the horizon as one continues to age. Uncertainty then becomes a part of life rather than a deviance from it, and acts of belonging can be understood as an expression of agency that's driven by the uncertainty of belonging. As we show, the uncertainty experienced in old age can open for potential new ways to strive for good lives despite aging in a precarious context of illness, social insecurity, absence of kin, and declining health.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have argued that sense of belonging can become unsettled and unraveled in old age as the body declines and one's role in the family and the community changes, causing renegotiation of belonging from the aging body. We have explored how the roles of three older adults – Karen, Lars, and Christian – changed in relation to their families, their access to the land, and to their communities as they continued to age. By focusing on every day acts performed to create a sense of belonging, we have shown how they navigated uncertain waters in their striving to understand themselves as older adults that live up to moral and social values in the community and in the Greenlandic Welfare State. By placing themselves in meaningful and interdependent relations, and by holding on to even small acts of belonging, such as keeping stamps from letters, they were able to renegotiate the importance of their roles in old age rather than seeing themselves as old and dependent, as burdens to others. Belonging then is also of existential importance in old age but continues to be challenged as the aging body continues to decline. Thus, the uncertainty of belonging in old age is not a momentary crisis, but rather a prolonged phase that continues to demand renegotiation of belonging. Seen in this way, acts of belonging can be understood as an expression of agency in the face of uncertainty, and as something that creates new possibilities in old age.

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Notes

¹ In Greenland "on the land" would be the same as being or going on the ice, being in the mountains, or on the mainland depending on the region. As Uummannaq is an island, people would use all three or simply talk about spending time in "nature" as opposed to being in Uummannaq or other inhabited places.

² A kaffemik is a gathering on special days such as a birthday, wedding, funeral, first day of school or graduation. It is usually held in people's homes or in a community house and includes a buffet of different foods and cakes. Guests arrive throughout the day and stay for varying amounts of time depending on how close their ties are to the hosts, whether they have other plans that day, and their mood.

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